




Surviving and Thriving as a New Principal

Here are 10 experience-tested rules that can help principals get through the difficult early years.

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by Shirley Curtis

I promised myself I would keep a journal of my first year as a principal that would help me to reflect on my accomplishments and analyze my effectiveness. Believe me, I had good intentions. But now, as I prepare to begin my third year, I realize that up to now I haven't written one word. It wasn't because there was nothing to write about.

I could have described how, on my second day on the job, I accidentally set off an alarm that signaled the police that there was a hostage situation in the school. Or I could share my thoughts on what to do when water pipes burst, how to keep ahead of staff evaluations, how to be a test coordinator, how to deal with student discipline, and how to manage time effectively.

My last two years as a "new" principal were extremely busy. I kept looking for answers to questions that troubled me. What was I not doing? What was I forgetting to do because I was young and green? But with time I have learned a lot about what it takes to become an effective school leader and I want to share some of that knowledge with other new principals.

Let me begin by saying that this article is based on neither intensive research nor a review of effective principal induction programs. It is simply a collection of 10 rules, mostly derived by trial and error, that I believe every new principal should live by.

Rule 1. *Build relationships with staff, students, and parents.* Before day one, get a copy of last year's yearbook and memorize every staff member's name and face. Talk to your staff and try to discover what is important to each of them. Include them in your decision-making. Write notes of appreciation and thanks. Eat lunch with your staff and students. Remember students' and parents' names. Listen to what parents are saying to you and return their e-mails and phone calls promptly.

Rule 2. *Don't change anything you don't have to change.* The school functioned before you got there, so let it operate as usual for the first year while you observe, take notes, and listen. Learn as much as you can about the school, its culture, and its history. Then, at the end of the year, discuss the needs of the school with your staff, identify areas for improvement, and begin to implement changes.

Rule 3. *Respect your students and staff.* For example, when students break school rules and are sent to your office for discipline, don't take on the role of judge and jury. Instead, ask them in a respectful manner to explain the situation and then summarize what you heard. Also be respectful and professional when dealing with staff. Listen to their ideas and consider them with an open mind. When an idea is not feasible, let them know why.

Rule 4. *Remember that the hardest persons to love usually need love the most.* Just one or two children can disrupt the entire building with their behavior. More than likely, they have emotional, social, or academic problems. They want people to pay attention to them, and negative attention is better than no attention. Find ways to encourage their positive behavior. For example, promise a positive phone call to their parents if they can stay out of trouble for a month—or a week. Ask a staff member or parent to take on the role of friend and mentor for a particularly difficult child.

Rule 5. *You can't make everyone happy.* I call this the One-Third Rule. You have to figure that as a principal a third of the people you encounter will like you no matter what (e.g., your parents or your friends); a third will be neutral, neither liking nor disliking you (e.g.,

neighbors or colleagues); and a third will dislike you, no matter what (*e.g.*, unreasonable staff members or parents of students). In dealing with someone in the last third, ask yourself, “Have I done everything I can possibly do to address this person’s concerns? Am I acting in the best interest of children?” If you can answer yes to both questions, then there is nothing more you can or should do to appease this person.

Rule 6. *Concentrate on only one or two improvements at a time.* Quality versus quantity is the key. Focus on one or two weak areas and then create an action plan to improve them. Encourage your staff to do the same. Very often, as you work in a few areas other areas will show improvement.

Rule 7. *Support professional development.* Ongoing, meaningful professional development for staff is vital and one-day, drive-through workshops are not the answer. Long-term support in identified areas of weakness (see Rule 6) helps staff members grow and become more effective. Create opportunities for easy, inexpensive professional development, such as: common planning time; study groups; research-sharing; classroom visits, intervention teams; cross-disciplinary or cross-grade level teams; team teaching; mentoring; and leadership roles for veteran teachers. Support networking within the school and with other schools, universities, and businesses. Find funds for after-school and summer education development programs, materials, school visits, and guest speakers. Effective professional development has to be personalized, time-intensive, and ongoing.

Rule 8. *Spend time mentoring new teachers.* If your school does not have a formal mentoring program, create one. Position effective teachers near new teachers and encourage them to form collaborative teams. Challenge your best teachers to share their classroom activities, lesson plans, and instructional methods.

Rule 9. *Know district policy.* Familiarize yourself with the district’s policy manual, student handbook, and teacher handbook. Stay abreast of new policies and policy changes. Know where to find information and who to ask for help.

Rule 10. Have fun. Take pleasure in your relationships with staff and students. Enjoy being a principal!

If you can live by these rules, you will need not only survive as a first-year principal, but thrive for years to come.

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